

# NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

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## THESIS

U. S. FOREIGN POLICY AND THE  
BALTIC STATES

by

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March 1996

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BALTIC STATES**

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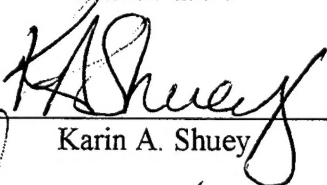
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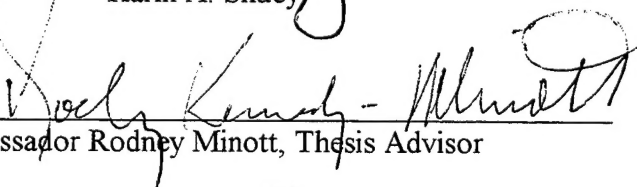
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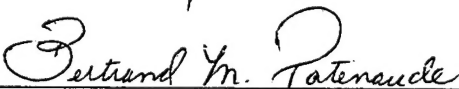
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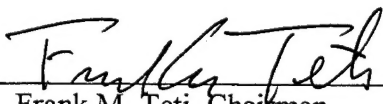
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines U.S. foreign policy toward the Baltic states from 1918 to 1991 to determine if the U.S. has been realistic in its dealings with small nations. An analysis of U.S. policy indicates that the United States acts hypocritically by accepting compromises on the very moral principals to which it claims to be the protectorate of, when domestic political costs are high. The sacrifice of national values degrades the credibility of the moral high ground necessary for U.S. policy.

This study reviews the events that occurred during the three major periods in U.S.-Baltic relations: The initial period of Baltic independence following World War I; the Soviet annexation of the Baltics during World War II; and finally the beginning of the second period of Baltic independence during the breakup of the Soviet Union. In all three cases, U.S. policy was unclear and contradictory. The Baltic case provides a good example of the tendency for U.S. policy to be paradoxical and ineffective.

This study concludes that despite the U.S. policy of nonrecognition of the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states during the Cold War, the United States failed to adhere to its principals when given the opportunity. In the process, it also neglected problems within its borders that required attention perhaps more urgently than those outside. The tendency for U.S. policy to ignore the issues that actually threaten its security internally and placing a higher priority on external matters that do not have a real impact on its standing could likely lead to its inadvertent downfall.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This thesis examines U.S. foreign policy toward the Baltic states from 1918 to 1991 to determine if the U.S. has been realistic in its dealings with small nations. An analysis of U.S. policy indicates that the United States acts hypocritically by accepting compromises on the very moral principals to which it claims to be the protectorate of when domestic political costs are high. The sacrifice of national values degrades the credibility of the moral high ground necessary for U.S. policy.

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Chapter I covers the period from 1918-1923 when the Baltics declared independence for the first time. President Wilson had declared his support for the right to self-determination for all nations, regardless of size in his Fourteen Points speech and several other forums. In the Baltic case however, his policy toward Russia directly contradicted his principles of freedom and democracy for all. His Russian policy took priority for the duration of his presidency even though by 1921 most of the rest of the world had accepted Baltic independence. The U.S. finally granted full recognition under Harding.

Chapter II examines the World War II period and the incorporation of the Baltics into the Soviet Union. President Roosevelt had clearly expressed his views on the right of small nations to independence in the form of the Atlantic Charter. Yet, appeasement of Russia once again became the overriding basis for U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. in the end chose to not recognize the Soviet annexation of the Baltics, but by the time they did, it was too late to back up the claim with any substance.

Chapter III shows that President Bush followed the example of his predecessors. When the

Soviet Union began to come apart, he denounced its incorporation of the Baltics and maintained the longtime recognition of their independence, but held the preservation of its territorial integrity as his first priority. Instead of immediately supporting Baltic efforts to separate from the USSR, Bush stood beside Gorbachev's attempt to preserve the Union.

This study concludes that despite the espoused values of two U.S. presidents at a critical time, and the U.S. policy of nonrecognition of the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states during the Cold War, the United States failed to adhere to its principals when given the opportunity. In the process, it also neglected problems within its borders that required attention perhaps more urgently than those outside. The tendency for U.S. policy to ignore the issues that actually threaten its security internally and placing a higher priority on external matters that do not have a real impact on its standing could likely lead to its inadvertent downfall.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Baltic states have declared independence twice in history. Both times the U.S. initially chose a policy of non recognition based largely on the need to maintain the territorial integrity of Russia or the Soviet Union, despite the professed American values of freedom and independence to which the Balts aspired. Although in both cases the U.S. finally did recognize Baltic sovereignty, the development of this policy was slow and unclear. U.S. reluctance in 1991 was especially puzzling since it never recognized the Soviet annexation of the Baltics in 1939. When the U.S. came in as the thirty-seventh nation to recognize the Baltic declarations, it was met with resentment in the Baltic nations and surprise throughout the West.

There were three major periods of U.S.-Baltic policy interaction. When the Baltic States first sought independence in 1917-1918, the Wilson administration became the first U.S. regime to face the Baltic question. Circumstances arising during World War II brought on the second phase of transition for the Baltics and the need for U.S. policy to respond. The third occasion for a U.S. policy change started in the late 1980s with the implementation of Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union, and culminated in September 1991 when the new Baltic independence was finally achieved and accepted worldwide.

Why did the U.S. oppose Baltic independence which aimed to establish democratic free market societies in 1918 and 1991? More generally, why did U.S. foreign policy support the territorial integrity of Russia/the Soviet Union in spite of ideological, political and military confrontation with the Soviet Communist Party? This thesis will examine

these two interrelated questions through a historical analysis of U.S. foreign policy toward the Baltics from 1917 to 1991 to determine if the U.S. was consistent and effective in the face of the Baltics' ethno-national and democratic movement to independence.

The Baltic case clearly demonstrates a tendency for U.S. leaders to abandon its principles when standing up for them seems politically imprudent. The U.S. has exhibited a clear contradiction between American values of democratic, free-market society and reluctance to recognize newly independent democracies. As a result, U.S. policy was contradictory and confusing in character regarding the Baltics, and very possibly will continue to be so in similar cases in the future.

This thesis consists of three chapters, each one devoted to one of the periods in question. An account of the events affecting the Baltic states is provided, followed by a discussion of U.S. policy toward the republics. Finally, an overall appraisal of U.S. Baltic policy and implications for U.S. effectiveness in future nationalist movements is provided.

## II. U.S. POLICY AND THE BALTIC STATES, 1918-1923

The history of U.S. relations with the Baltic States dates back to the republics' first declarations of independence after the First World War. Estonia and Lithuania declared sovereignty in February 1918 and Latvia followed suit in November. The U.S. was the only country to officially consider the Baltic question as part of the general issue of Russia and for several years renounced the very concept of these nations being separated from Russia.<sup>1</sup> The Wilson administration delayed in recognizing the new states and establishing diplomatic relations until 1922, after a process characterized by much debate and contradiction.

### A. WILSON'S PRINCIPLES

President Wilson had a reputation for the support of sovereignty for all states, as his views expressed in several forums can testify. On May 27, 1916 he addressed the League to Enforce Peace in Washington:

We believe these fundamental things: First, that every people has a right to choose the sovereignty under which they shall live....Second, that the small states of the world have a right to enjoy the same respect for their sovereignty and for their territorial integrity that great and powerful nations expect and insist upon, and, third, that the world has the right to be free from every disturbance of its peace that has its origin in aggression and disregard of the rights of peoples and nations.<sup>2</sup>

He addressed a Joint Session of Congress on January 22, 1917 to a similar effect:

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<sup>1</sup>Gregory Meiskins, *The Baltic Riddle: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania -- Key Points of European Peace*, (New York: L.B. Fischer), 1943, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Woodrow Wilson Archives, Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division; United States Congress, *Congressional Record Containing the Proceedings and Debates of the Congress*, (Washington, 1917), vol. 54, p. 1742.

The equality of nations upon which peace must be founded if it is to last must be an equality of rights; the guarantees exchanged must neither recognize nor imply a difference between big nations and small, between those that are powerful and those that are weak...no right anywhere exists to hand peoples about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were property.<sup>3</sup>

On April 2, 1917, Wilson addressed a Joint Session again:

We are glad...to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples...for the right of nations great and small and the privilege of men anywhere to choose their way of life and obedience...We shall fight for the rights and liberties of small nations.<sup>4</sup>

Wilson dispatched a message to the Russian people on May 26:

America seeks no aggrandizement of any kind. She is fighting for no advantage of her own, but for the liberation of peoples everywhere. We are fighting for the liberty, the self-government, and the undictated development of all peoples...No people must be forced under sovereignty under which it does not wish to live. No territory is to change hands except for the purpose of securing those who inhabit it a fair chance of life and liberty.<sup>5</sup>

Wilson made his famous Fourteen Point message to a Joint Session of Congress on January 8, 1918. The most relevant sections are provided below:

The evacuation of all Russian territory and such a settlement of all questions affecting Russia will secure the best and freest cooperation of the other nations of the world in obtaining for her an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy, and assure her of a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing; and, more than a welcome, assistance also of every kind that she may need and may herself desire. The treatment accorded Russia by her sister nations in the months to

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<sup>3</sup>Congressional Record, vol. 55, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup>Woodrow Wilson, *War and Peace: Presidential Messages, Addresses, and Public Papers, 1917-1924*, Ray S. Baker and William E. Dodd, eds., 2 vols. (New York/London, 1927), vol. II, p. 287.

<sup>5</sup>Wilson, *War and Peace*, vol. I, p. 151.

come will be the acid test of their good-will, of their comprehension of her needs as distinguished from their own interests and of their intelligent and unselfish sympathy. (Point VI)

...specific covenants affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small nations [are necessary]. (Point XIV)

...An evident principle runs through the whole program I have outlined. It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak. Unless this principle be made its foundation, no part of the structure of international justice can stand. The people of the United States could act upon no other principle. (Closing)<sup>6</sup>

Wilson's overwhelming message is unmistakable. Except for Point VI, he clearly espoused the rights of all nations to self-determination regardless of size or strength.

The President held to another tenet that would prove to be inconsistent with his convictions regarding self-determination. This was his judgment that empires should not be divided. Referring to the conference scheduled to decide the terms of peace following WW I, he stated that "...any dismemberment of empires [was] 'inexpedient and in the end futile.' He wanted to deal with the representatives of empires rather than with those of 'inchoate nationalities,' whose very presence at the Peace Conference was 'highly undesirable.'"<sup>7</sup>

Point XIII of his fourteen however, advocated the creation of Poland, which would be carved out of Russian territory. His government later recognized the

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<sup>6</sup>Congressional Record, vol. 55, p. 6407-6408.

<sup>7</sup>Albert N. Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations 1918-1922: The Struggle Over Recognition*, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press), 1965, p. 22.

independence of Finland in May 1919, which had also been part of the Russian Empire. The inconsistency of his policies was apparent.

These two main facets of Wilson's policy were bound to come into direct conflict with each other. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania fit perfectly into both scenarios Wilson offered. Unfortunately, in the practical application of his policy where the Baltic States were concerned, Point VI and his penchant against dismemberment were the principles that seemed to take priority over the others.

## **B. U.S. POLICY AND RUSSIA**

There were three major tenets to which the U.S. government was committed regarding Russia. First, they did not want to recognize the Soviet government as the new leaders of the country, preferring to support the maintenance of the Provisional government in power. Second, they were determined to stay out of Russia's internal affairs. Finally, they saw the maintenance of Russia's territorial integrity as essential to the preservation of power by the provisional government.<sup>8</sup>

The Wilson administration made several further assumptions about Russia that weighted their policy against Baltic independence. First, they believed that Russia would not be able to survive economically without free access to Baltic ports. They also maintained that Russia needed a safety zone along the Baltic both to secure military and economic strength for itself, and to serve as a buffer between Russia and Germany in the

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<sup>8</sup>John M. Thompson, *Russia, Bolshevism, and the Versailles Peace*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1966, p. 46.

interest of protecting Western security. The U.S. had agreed to protect Russia's interests during the turmoil of the Bolshevik uprisings, which were not expected to last long.

As of the end of March 1918, Washington was "...not disposed as yet to recognize any independent governments [in Russia] until the will of the Russian people has been more definitely expressed."<sup>9</sup> This statement, which was drafted by U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing, and Wilson's *Message to the Russian People* prompted Ambassador Francis, the U.S. representative in Russia, to issue a remark at least partly for Baltic consumption. He stated that "...his country would do all possible 'to promote the truest interests of the Russians and to protect and preserve the integrity of this great country.'"<sup>10</sup>

Wilson's bias plainly favored the interests of Russia very highly. His priority was to ensure the security of Russia and its empire to preserve its greatness as a nation. This policy was in direct contradiction to his statements to the League to Enforce Peace, to Congress, and to the Russian people, as well as the principles in his Fourteen Points address.

### C. EVENTS IN THE BALTIC STATES

Germany occupied the Baltic States during the war. Armistice was concluded between Russia and Germany at the peace conference at Brest-Litovsk in December

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<sup>9</sup>*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1918, Russia*, vol. II, p. 743.

<sup>10</sup>Tarulis, p. 76.

1917, but German hostilities resumed in the Baltics in February 1918. Russia signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 3, abandoning its areas of interest beyond Russian borders, to include the Baltic states. Baltic officials began their campaign for recognition of their sovereignty.

Officials from two of the Baltic states approached the U.S. Embassy in Petrograd in January 1918. On the 18th, a Latvian delegation made a request to send an emissary to the U.S., which was accepted as long he didn't "[teach] peace at any price."<sup>11</sup> They were also advised by Ambassador Francis to maintain contact with Russia so as not to deprive them of sea access.

On January 24, the Estonian government adopted a resolution outlining its goals. It demanded an immediate proclamation of independence, internationally guaranteed neutrality, and representation in the peace conference. It also called for a "...popular referendum, supervised by a neutral power [to] decide the question of the form of government, the eventual union with any other state, and her natural boundaries."<sup>12</sup> Estonian representatives visited the American Embassy the next day asking for formal consideration of the issue of Estonian independence at the Peace Conference and to allow an Estonian representative to take place in the discussion. The Embassy sent its report of

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<sup>11</sup>Tarulis, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup>Malbone W. Graham, *The Diplomatic Recognition of the Baltic States. Part II: Estonia*, (Berkeley, 1939), pp. 237-238, 308-309.

the visit 2 ½ weeks after it occurred by regular mail instead of a cable; the report did not arrive in Washington until April 8.<sup>13</sup>

Lithuania declared its independence on February 16, 1918. Estonia followed on February 24. Both declarations were announced to the U.S. government or its representatives in advance because of President Wilson's public support for the rights of small nations. Latvia declared independence on November 18, 1918. Based on its policy toward Russia, the U.S. continued to procrastinate in responding to repeated requests by Balts to recognize their independence.

The German occupation came to an end in November 1918. As the German army withdrew from Baltic territory, Bolshevik troops filled the vacuum. The Red army was called on to occupy all three states as a base from which the Bolshevik cause could be advanced into Germany and Scandinavia. This was the first time the Balts asked for American intervention to maintain order. Lithuanian delegates in Belgium appealed to the American commander there, while the Lithuanian government sent a request to the State Department two days later.<sup>14</sup>

On January 3, 1919 Riga fell to Bolshevik hands for a five month occupation. On May 22, a joint action by the Latvian army and German territorials liberated the city from the Bolsheviks. Allied intervention stopped German terror and ordered German troops to leave Latvia on June 1.

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<sup>13</sup>Tarulis, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup>Tarulis, p. 98.

Estonia held elections to establish a Constituent Assembly in April 1919, after liberation of the country but before the threat of the Red army had been fully removed. The full assembly passed a new constitution on June 15, 1920 and came into effect on December 21. Latvia's Constituent Assembly convened on May 1, 1920. Its constitution was approved on February 15, 1922 and passed into law on November 7.<sup>15</sup> The Lithuanian Constituent Assembly was held in April 1920, with the permanent constitution becoming effective on August 1, 1922.

The Estonian army concluded an agreement with the Bolsheviks to suspend joint military activities on December 20, 1919. They signed an armistice agreement on January 3, 1920. On February 2, Estonia concluded the Treaty of Tartu with Soviet Russia, establishing peace terms and boundaries accepted by both sides.

Most of the world recognized Baltic independence by January 26, 1921. They were admitted to the League of Nations that year. The U.S. held off with their recognition until July 28, 1922.

#### **D. U.S. BALTIC POLICY**

The January 1918 visits by Baltic delegates to Petrograd showed that the U.S. embassy was not prepared to deal with the Baltic issue, nor was it considered a high priority. Ambassador Francis told the Latvians he had "nothing against an independent

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<sup>15</sup>Georg von Rauch, *The Baltic States, the Years of Independence: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, 1917-1940*, (London: C. Hurst & Company), 1974, p. 77-78.

Latvia, but the defeat of Germany came first."<sup>16</sup> Counselor J. Butler Wright, who received the Estonians, brought up the famed principles of democracy for which the U.S. entered the war, along with Wilson's public policy to wait until the Russian majority to express their will, which contradicted the Estonian desire for a neutral, popular referendum.

The Baltic appeal for American aid in November 1918 might as well have fallen on deaf ears. The Lithuanian Prime Minister's request was passed around the State Department for months without even a reply. American Lithuanians asked their government for recognition and aid on behalf of their native land on November 25, and again on December 2. They finally received a reply on December 5 to the effect that the U.S. was "...honor bound to refrain from adopting any premature action before the Peace Conference" because of its proclaimed loyalty to Russia.<sup>17</sup>

In the fall of 1919, Washington was anxiously observing Japanese operations in Siberia, and feared that recognition of the Baltic states as separate from Russia would offer a precedent for Japan to annex parts of the Russian far east.<sup>18</sup> This sentiment carried over into the next year, though the U.S. government did offer one concession in March 1920. They stopped the practice of stamping visas "Russia (Lithuania only)" and

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<sup>16</sup>Tarulis., p. 11.

<sup>17</sup>Tarulis, p. 101.

<sup>18</sup>Alfred Erich Senn, *The Emergence of Modern Lithuania*, (New York: Columbia University Press), 1959, p. 180.

replaced it with just "Lithuania." The State Department however issued a statement that this change in no way affected the status of U.S. recognition of Lithuania's sovereignty.<sup>19</sup>

Secretary of State Lansing resigned in February 1920 to be replaced by Bainbridge Colby, who brought new practices to Baltic relations. Unlike Lansing, he was willing to meet with unofficial representatives of the Baltic states in Washington. In May, John A. Gade, the U.S. Commissioner to the Baltic Provinces resigned and was succeeded by Evan Young, who contributed to an evolving change in U.S. relations with the region.

While in complete agreement with the State Department's Russian policy in support of the Provisional Government, Young recommended a new course regarding the Baltics. On July 23, he sent a lengthy memorandum to Washington calling for the immediate *de facto* recognition of the three states to be followed closely, conditions permitting, by *de jure* recognition. To support his proposal, he cited the growing strength of the Bolshevik government with "...no sign of either external or internal forces or movements which eventually might effect its overthrow."<sup>20</sup> He thought that the border states were worthy of aid and encouragement in the effort to stem the spread of communism, and that such assistance to the Baltic states would help further the State Department's goals. The memo's suggestions met with objection in the Department for at least three reasons: it boldly contradicted the continued policy of nonrecognition; it

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<sup>19</sup>Senn, p. 206.

<sup>20</sup>Tarulis, p. 306.

would be done without consultation with Russia; and it attached conditions inappropriate to *de jure* recognition.<sup>21</sup>

On August 2, Colby made clear his views on Russian policy in a confidential message to his ambassadors in London, Rome, Paris, and Warsaw in response to plans for a general European conference to settle the Russian problem which proposed to recognize the Bolshevik government and accept Russia's partition. Colby stated that a permanent solution to the issue of Russia could not be reached until

all elements of the Russian people [were] represented effectively for the consideration of the...needs...of the different regions which made up Imperial Russia...A decision arrived at in any international conference to recognize as independent governments the factions which now exercise some degree of control over territory which was part of Imperial Russia, and to establish their relationships and boundaries...will seriously prejudice the future of Russia and an enduring peace...[as the] Department thinks that a real solution of the actual problem will be delayed and complicated by the dismemberment of Russia, it has been persistent in refusing to recognize the Baltic States as independent states apart from Russia.<sup>22</sup>

The Bolshevik army launched a successful offensive in Poland in the summer of 1920 which prompted Young to request military assistance from Washington. He reported on August 10 that "...the situation in the Baltic area had so deteriorated he found it advisable to urge that a destroyer be dispatched to Baltic waters."<sup>23</sup> He also made plans for the evacuation of the 250 American citizens in the area. The Navy Department sent its flagship operating in European waters to the Baltic under orders to "exercise, so far as possible, by [the commander's] presence and moral influence, a restraining effect in the interests of peace

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<sup>21</sup>Tarulis, p. 307.

<sup>22</sup>Foreign Relations 1920, vol. III, pp. 653-656.

<sup>23</sup>Tarulis, p. 315.

and order..." and to be prepared to help in the evacuation of U.S. citizens if necessary.<sup>24</sup> Its operations were limited to a demonstration of presence along the Baltic coast, making stops in various ports.

As the Wilson administration drew to a close, it remained consistent in its policy of nonrecognition. Young and others made several more appeals for a change, but the government demonstrated no intention to do so. Only with the inauguration of Warren Harding in March 1921 and the appointment of Charles E. Hughes as his Secretary of State did the Balts begin to see a change in U.S. policy. Charles Albrecht, who had been appointed Consul in Tallinn in July 1920, appealed to Hughes for recognition of Estonia on inauguration eve:

The United States remains the outstanding great power which has withheld...recognition... Now that the principle European powers have recognized Estonia *de jure*, it can make little difference in her international status whether she is recognized by the United States or not, and failure to recognize will only cause ill-feeling and difficulty in trade relations, without appreciable effect, presumably, upon the course of events in Estonia and Russia.<sup>25</sup>

There was no record of a reply from Hughes. Apparently after consulting with Albrecht, the Estonian government reciprocated Albrecht's appointment by sending a Consul to New York. Hughes responded to this move by clarifying that the U.S. government could have no official relations with the Estonian.

At Young's urging, the State Department sent an official consul to Lithuania in July, but still did not budge on its policy. Only when Young emphasized that Great Britain, as an economic competitor, had already appointed a Commissioner for Lithuania

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<sup>24</sup>Tarulis, p. 316.

<sup>25</sup>Tarulis, p. 340.

did the State Department relent. Even so, the move did not involve the status of the Lithuanian government. The new consulate was established only to facilitate trade and the growing volume of business between the two countries originating from Lithuanians living in the U.S.

By September all three Baltic countries had representatives in Washington, none of whom were recognized as official delegates. U.S. documents continued to refer to the "so-called" republics or governments of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, despite the presence of an American Commissioner and consular officers "...within the territory which they control...[to maintain] informal relations of a friendly character."<sup>26</sup> Even when the League of Nations voted the Baltic republics into full membership on September 22, the U.S. failed to follow suit. Young remained the only one in the State Department concerned about the Baltic issue. Members of Congress made appeals on the Balts' behalf over the next several months, but no change in policy was made.

A major breakthrough came in April 1922 with the resignation of Ambassador Bakhmetev, the Russian representative in Washington. He had been a significant obstacle to U.S. recognition with much influence on State Department policy. With his departure, it did not take long for the opinions of U.S. officials to shift; by the end of May Hughes and Young agreed that all three republics merited recognition.

Domestic pressure on the State Department grew and became more difficult to resist, prompting Hughes to express his belief to President Harding in July that the time had come to separate the Baltic states from the Russian problem and extend to them full

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<sup>26</sup>Tarulis, p. 340.

recognition. He sent a letter to the president to this effect on July 22. Harding replied favorably the same day and the formal announcement was issued on July 28.

President Wilson, professed to be a champion of the self-determination of small states, turned out to be an empty promise for the Baltics. He was completely contradictory in his policies and proved to value the concept of self-determination only as an “expression of a moral precept as something to be desired but generally unattainable in the lives of nations.”<sup>27</sup> He might actually have been able to avert the communist threat had he shown more support for all the struggling democracies in Europe, instead of making the preservation of Russia's Provisional government his priority. Only with his replacement by Harding, a new Secretary of State, and a change in Russian representation in Washington could the Balts achieve their longtime goal of global acceptance.

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<sup>27</sup>Robert Lansing, *The Peace Negotiations: A Personal Narrative* (Boston/New York, 1921), p. 100.

### III. SOVIET INCORPORATION OF THE BALTICS AND U.S. NONRECOGNITION, 1939-1988

The period of independence brought several challenges to the Baltic governments. Their social, economic, and political structures required significant reform to conform to their new status as nation-states. The adoption of liberal-democratic constitutions provided for weak executives and single-chamber parliaments. None of the countries had support structures capable of creating stable governments from their radical parliamentary constitutions and electoral rules, so all three ended up turning to some form of authoritarianism by the end of the inter-war period.

In 1939, Hitler and Stalin, via their foreign ministers, concluded a secret pact which would change the face of Eastern Europe. Dividing the region into spheres of influence, the pact relegated the Baltic states into the Soviet sphere, where it would remain for the next half century. The U.S. maintained a policy of nonrecognition of this illegal annexation throughout the period.

President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill jointly forged the Atlantic Charter on August 14, 1941, agreeing on a set of eight principles shared in their national policies. It stated that neither nation would pursue territorial increases during or after the war; that changes in territory or forms of government that did occur as a result of hostilities would be decided in accordance with the wishes of the people they affected; and that they wished "to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who

been forcibly deprived of them."<sup>28</sup> By September 1941, Stalin had also formally acceded to the terms of the charter. Ironically, he told British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden that "he thought the Charter was directed against those who were trying to get world domination."<sup>29</sup>

From the beginning of the war, Roosevelt favored a policy of no pre-determination regarding the territorial and political matters in question. He intended to ensure military victory, then address these issues at the peace table after the war. The policy was based on the Western leaders' belief that predetermined resolutions during World War I had led to disaster at the Paris Peace Conference. The U.S. government firmly defended this principle with respect to the Nazi advance into Russia, and in regard to the Baltic states when Russia began early in the war to press postwar territorial claims.

#### **A. EVENTS IN THE BALTICS**

Signs that Baltic sovereignty might be in jeopardy began to appear in the late 1930s. German attention turned to the Baltics in April 1938, when Hitler told his ambassador in Rome that "once the Sudetenland issue is settled, the Baltic will be Germany's next objective"<sup>30</sup> Germany began its diplomatic efforts in the Baltics in April

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<sup>28</sup>Department of State Executive Agreement Series no. 236; Foreign Relations, 1941, vol. 1, pp. 368-69.

<sup>29</sup>Robert A. Vitas, *The United States and Lithuania: The Stimson Doctrine of Nonrecognition*, (New York: Praeger), 1990, p. 56.

<sup>30</sup>Izidors Vizulis, *The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939: The Baltic Case*, (New York: Praeger), 1988, p. 9.

1939 with a secret offer from Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop to Estonia and Latvia for pacts of non-aggression, which were actually concluded on June 7, 1939.<sup>31</sup>

In March 1939, the Soviet government unilaterally declared that Estonia and Latvia were in its area of interest and offered military assistance and volunteered to protect them against direct or indirect aggression. The Soviets also warned the two countries against conceding any unique rights and privileges to other nations. The Baltic governments rejected the Soviet proposals on April 7, 1939 as interference in their internal affairs and encroachment on their sovereignty.<sup>32</sup>

August 23, 1939 was the day Molotov and Ribbentrop signed their pact containing a secret protocol splitting Eastern Europe between them. As a result Germany was to invade Poland while the Soviet Union would occupy Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Lithuania was overrun on June 15, 1940 and Estonia and Latvia two days later. The action was in direct violation of bilateral peace treaties concluded in 1920 between the USSR and each of the states as three neutral members of the League of Nations.

The Soviets proceeded to install puppet governments in all three states. To legitimize its occupation, one-party elections in breach of the countries' democratic constitutions began in July. The nations were illegally incorporated into the Soviet Union a few weeks later.

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<sup>31</sup>Rolf Ahmann, "Nazi German policy towards the Baltic States on the eve of the Second World War," in *The Baltic and the Outbreak of the Second World War*, eds. John Hiden and Thomas Lane, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1992, p. 59.

<sup>32</sup>Ahmann, p. 10.

In the summer of 1941, the republics were subject to mass deportations, arrests, and executions. The Soviets began the process as the first stage of Sovietization. It included a systematic elimination of people involved in public life during the period of independence, as well as the imprisonment or murder of over 100,000 others. Soviet occupation ended in July with the advance of the German army, who continued their predecessors' practice. Several hundred thousand more Balts were deported or executed under the three-year German occupation.<sup>33</sup> The Red Army made its return from July through September 1944. Over 200,000 Balts escaped to the West during the Soviet reoccupation.

The Yalta conference in February 1945 sealed the fate of the Baltics for the last time. No specific discussion of the region took place and Stalin was allowed to keep the territory he gained from his agreement with Hitler. Having already staged a referendum in which the Baltics appeared to have voted to accept Soviet rule, Stalin refused Western requests to hold another plebiscite to confirm their acquiescence. Stalinist terror ensued, with further deportations bringing the total since 1940 to reflect 10% of the entire Baltic population. A quiet war of Baltic partisans against the occupation continued until 1956, when forced collectivization combined with the other factors brought these efforts to an end.

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<sup>33</sup>Inese A. Smith and Marita V. Grunts, "The Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania," *World Bibliographical Series*, 161 Oxford: Clio Press, (1993): xli.

## B. U.S. POLICY

In response to Hitler's aggressive statements in March 1939, Roosevelt appealed to him early in the next month to conclude non-aggression treaties with all the countries that felt threatened by Germany, including the Baltic states. The request provoked Ribbentrop to demand declarations from the countries in question that "...they had not authorized Roosevelt's proposal, and that they did not feel threatened by Nazi Germany."<sup>34</sup> The Balts did so and expressed their intention to remain strictly neutral. Nonetheless, pacts were concluded with Estonia and Latvia in June.

On July 23, 1940, the State Department issued its policy statement regarding the Soviet occupation of the Baltics, drafted by Acting Secretary of State Sumner Welles:

During these past few days the devious processes whereunder the political independence and territorial integrity of the three Baltic Republics -- Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania -- were to be deliberately annihilated by one of their more powerful neighbors, have been drawing rapidly to their conclusion. From the day when the peoples of these Republics first gained their independence and democratic form of government, the people of the United States have watched their admirable progress in self-government with deep and sympathetic interest. The policy of this Government is universally known. The people of the United States are opposed to predatory activities, no matter whether they are carried on by the use of force or by the threat of force. They are likewise opposed to any form of intervention on the part of one State, however powerful, in the domestic concerns of any other sovereign State, however weak. These principles constitute the very foundation upon which the existing relationship between the twenty-one sovereign republics of the New World rest. The United States will continue to stand by these principles, because of the conviction of the American people that unless the doctrine in which these principles are inherent once again governs the relations between nations, the rule of reason, of justice, and of law -- in other words, the basis of modern civilization itself -- cannot be preserved.<sup>35</sup>

When the Soviet Union entered World War II after Hitler ordered his army to attack on June 22, 1941, Stalin pursued agreements with his new British allies regarding postwar boundaries and other political issues. Specifically, he insisted on recognition after

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<sup>34</sup>Ahmann, p. 61.

<sup>35</sup>U.S. Department of State, *Department of State Bulletin*, 3, 57, (July 27, 1940), p. 48.

the war of the USSR's 1941 borders, which included the Baltic States. This led to a meeting in Moscow between British Foreign Minister Eden and Stalin on December 16, 1941.

The U.S. diplomatic standing regarding the Baltics was practical from the time they entered the war. It was based on achieving military victory first, and resolving political issues afterward. On December 5, the U.S. expressed its concern about Eden's trip to Moscow in a message from the State Department to British Ambassador Winant: "Insofar as our post-war policies are concerned, it is our belief that these have been delineated in the Atlantic Charter, which today represents the attitude not only of the United States, but also of Great Britain and of the Soviet Union."<sup>36</sup> U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull pressed Eden before his departure for Moscow not to consent to Soviet incorporation of the Baltics.

By February 1942, Stalin had put much more pressure on Eden, who recommended acquiescence to the Soviet demands on the Baltic issue. Churchill was in Washington when he got this news and held to the policy of waiting until the war was over to resolve territorial matters. On February 4, Hull backed Churchill's stance:

It must be clear to all intelligent people...that the Baltic States were invaded by Soviet armed forces, and that the population of these states at no time had an opportunity to freely express their desires as to whether or not they would like to remain independent. Our own statement issued at the time showed that we had no doubt with respect to what was taking place. If, therefore, the British and American governments should take the position that these states entered the Soviet Union in

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<sup>36</sup>I. Joseph Vizulis, *Nations Under Duress: The Baltic States*, (Port Washington: National University Publications), 1985, p. 60.

accordance with the expressed desires of the population, every government in the world...would know, at least privately, that the British and American governments were guilty of insincerity.<sup>37</sup>

President Roosevelt appealed directly to Stalin on March 2 to remove territorial matters from the proposed treaty. To appease Americans of Baltic origin and hopefully win their votes in the next election, the president attempted a compromise in the favor of the native Balts. He acceded the right for Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Finns who did not want to live under communist rule to leave the territories with their belongings.<sup>38</sup>

The State Department relentlessly and forcefully maintained opposition to any concessions to Stalin regarding the Baltic States. Adolf A. Berle, the Assistant Secretary of State, had serious reservations about the president's statement on free immigration. He feared that "...the situation was developing into a 'Baltic Munich,' in which the United States would find herself both morally and practically compromised."<sup>39</sup>

In a letter from Churchill to Roosevelt dated March 7, 1942, the British position changed to reflect that military necessity had taken priority over diplomatic judgment. He asked Roosevelt for a free hand in signing Stalin's treaty, believing that it would be imprudent to endanger the British cause to save the Baltic states. The appeal did not change Roosevelt's feelings regarding the issue, but he admitted that neither the British nor

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<sup>37</sup>Vizulis, *Nations*, p. 63.

<sup>38</sup>Vizilis, *Nations*, p. 69.

<sup>39</sup>David Kirby, "Morality or Expediency? The Baltic Question in British-Soviet Relations 1941-1942" in *The Baltic States in Peace and War, 1917-1945*, eds. V. Stanley Vardys and Romuald J. Misiunas (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978), p. 167.

the American army could do anything about the territories occupied by the Red Army. In the end, he would bow to the inevitable, but did not wish to sacrifice the principles for which his government was fighting.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately Stalin gave in to Roosevelt's request and the British-Soviet treaty was signed on May 26, 1942 without mention of the frontier question.

Conflicting dialog among U.S. officials ensued as the war continued. An official position finally emerged by March 1943 and was documented in a memorandum by Secretary of Commerce Harry Hopkins dated March 22. The President "...did not like the idea of turning the Baltic States over to Russia...he thought the old plebiscite was probably a fake and while he had no doubt that the Baltic States would vote to ally themselves with Russia, he though Russia should...go through the motions of getting that done."<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile the U.S. and Great Britain would agree that Russia would have control of the Baltics' foreign affairs and finances until the new plebiscite could be held.

Secretary of State Hull went to Moscow to meet with Stalin in October 1943. The President had instructed him to appeal to Stalin on the premise of high morality. While neither the U.S. nor Britain would go to war over the Baltics, it would be in Russia's own interest to express its willingness to hold another plebiscite two years or so after the war ended, especially since the rest of the world did not seem to have as much faith in the first election as Stalin did.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Kirby, p. 166.

<sup>41</sup>Foreign Affairs of the U.S., 3 (1943), p. 35

<sup>42</sup>Vizulis, *Nations*, p. 71.

The first summit meeting of the "Big Three" -- Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin -- was the Teheran Conference from November 28 to December 1, 1943. The priority of the U.S. here was "...attempting to remove all possible reasons for Soviet suspicion of Allied activities."<sup>43</sup> Stalin agreed to enter the war against Japan after Germany was defeated, and to join the United Nations on the condition that its executive organ would not have the power to make binding decisions. In return, the Western powers passively agreed to Soviet annexation of the Baltic States. Though the Balts were not often specifically mentioned at the conference, Roosevelt brought up the question of free elections and free expression. He said that "he personally was confident that the people would vote to join the Soviet Union."<sup>44</sup>

Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin met again in Yalta in February 1945. One of the results was the adoption of the Declaration on Liberated Europe, in which Stalin agreed to permit free elections in Eastern Europe, and Roosevelt took him at his word. Roosevelt had, but chose not to use the military, economic, and technological power at his disposal to change the course on which Eastern Europe was heading.

There were at least two trump cards Roosevelt held over Stalin to encourage him to see beyond the defeat of Hitler and consider a fully liberated Europe as the ultimate goal of Allied efforts. Though not a politically viable option, the U.S. was in a position to send troops through Germany to take on the Soviets in Eastern Europe, the mere threat of

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<sup>43</sup>Vizulis, *Molotov*, p. 53.

<sup>44</sup>Foreign Relations of the United States, Conferences at Cairo and Teheran, 1943, pp. 336-37.

which may have been enough for a Soviet withdrawal.<sup>45</sup> Coercion based on the U.S. aid that allowed the Soviet Army to defeat Hitler's might also have proven worthwhile. Roosevelt however opted for no such effort.

Even before Yalta, in January 1945 the State Department had acknowledged the reality of the Baltic situation. As much as they didn't like it, the Balts were under Soviet control and they admitted there was nothing the U.S. government could do about it. The right of every nation to self-determination as stated in Wilson's Fourteen Points and the Atlantic Charter had become an empty phrase.<sup>46</sup>

Former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union George F. Kennan was not supportive of Roosevelt's no predetermination policy. He did not get the impression that "Roosevelt had any substantive objections -- any real political objections -- to seeing these areas go to Russia, or indeed that he cared much about the issue for its own sake... His anxiety was rather that he had a large body of voting constituents...of...Baltic...origin... and he simply did not want this issue to become a factor in domestic politics which could make trouble for his wartime leadership of the country."<sup>47</sup> Kennan also considers Allied wartime policy to reflect "...an inexcusable body of ignorance about the nature of the Russian Communist movement, about the history of diplomacy...and about what had been going on in...the Baltic States."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Vizulis, *Molotov*, p. 26.

<sup>46</sup>Vizulis, *Nations*, p. 72.

<sup>47</sup>George F. Kennan, *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin*, (New York: Mentor), 1961, p. 335.

<sup>48</sup>Kennan, p. 333.

The U.S. continued its policy of nonrecognition of the incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union based on Welles' statement of July 1940 throughout the postwar period and into 1991, in name at least. The State Department rejected Baltic efforts to establish governments in exile immediately after the war and encouraged their active diplomatic presence in the U.S., believing that the "role of the Baltic envoys [was] to uphold the idea of a free Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania."<sup>49</sup> Several administrations reaffirmed the policy via letters to the Baltic diplomatic representatives in Washington. Vice President Humphrey proclaimed Baltic Freedom Day along with their right to independence on June 12, 1966.

The U.S. House of representatives commissioned an investigation of the Baltic annexation. Three years later, a joint resolution requested the President, through appropriate measures, to direct the attention of the United Nations and world opinion to the Baltic case and their denial to the right of self-determination.

U.S. policy regarding the incorporation of the Baltic was inconsistent and short-sighted. It provides another example of political necessity taking priority over espoused principles when U.S. leadership places little immediate significance on rights supposedly possessed by all nations regardless of size. The contradiction and lack of interest demonstrated by Roosevelt's policy came to show the truth in the statement made by Welles in July 1940. The doctrine of self-determination failed to triumph, and the world witnessed a fifty-year absence of the rule of reason, justice, and law.

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<sup>49</sup>David M. Crowe, *The Baltic States and the Great Powers: Foreign Relations, 1938-1940*, (Boulder: Westview Press), 1993, p. 178.



#### **IV. THE ROLE OF BUSH'S POLICY IN THE BREAKUP OF THE SOVIET UNION**

The selection of Mikhail Gorbachev in March 1985 as general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union paved the way for extensive change in the USSR, ultimately leading to its breakup. He instigated radical reform measures to include a campaign of de-Stalinization and drastic economic revision. While intending to stabilize his nation and repair a severely ailing economy, instead Gorbachev's measures worked together to foster the opposite reaction. De-Stalinization efforts allowed the Soviet republics to freely express separatist tendencies, while economic restructuring provided them the opportunity to develop their own systems of financial support. Eventually, the authority and legitimacy of the Soviet state was challenged and lost in a six-year period.

When the Baltic states were the first of the Soviet republics to declare independence in 1991, President Bush experienced pressure from several sides to immediately recognize the new states. Many issues faced him, to include the support of democracy, ethnic self-determination, questions of morality, and ideological consistency. Critics of his actions accused him of betrayal, ignorance, and weak foreign policy when he didn't seem to consider all of these aspects. In spite of such disapproval, even from officials at the State Department, the policy Bush chose to follow during this period was the most realistic and best protected U.S. national interests, and was based mainly on preserving control of the disposition of Soviet nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, it defied logic and American principles, and fostered resentment among Baltic nationals and supporters of democracy worldwide.

From the outset of his administration, Bush took on a positive, supportive stance regarding Gorbachev. He quickly established a personal rapport with the Soviet leader and promised "...no 'foot-dragging' in the improvement of U.S.-Soviet relations."<sup>50</sup> Policy dealings between the two nations over the next few years was characterized by relatively frequent personal contact among the heads of state and their foreign ministers.

President Bush's chief concern rising from the possibility of the Soviet Union's loss of territory was the safety of its nuclear weapons. He feared that if any of the republics broke away, the rest, especially those with nuclear weapons deployed on their territory, could follow suit haphazardly, with control of the weapons in the hands of questionably stable governments. In order to discourage such behavior, a clear precedent had to be set for orderly, legal withdrawal from the union.<sup>51</sup>

When the Baltics were the first to make a serious effort toward independence, the need for the development of new policy became evident. When they actually declared independence in the end of August 1991, the mechanism for recognition of new post-Soviet states acceptable to Bush was not yet in place. Through daily dialog with Gorbachev, he ensured that the Supreme Soviet first voted to approve Baltic secession by using U.S. aid as a bargaining chip.

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<sup>50</sup>Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company), p. 494.

<sup>51</sup>F. Nicholas Burns interview, former Baltic Desk Officer for the National Security Council, June 28, 1995.

## A. EVENTS IN THE BALTIC STATES

Activism in the Baltic states began in 1987 and 1988 with demonstrations on the anniversaries of various significant dates in the history of Baltic-Soviet relations. In 1988, each country established a popular front movement (Lithuania's was called *Sajudis*) and declared their own languages state languages. On November 16, 1988, the Estonian Supreme Soviet became the first of the three to declare independence and take control of state property. The declaration was annulled ten days later by the USSR Supreme Soviet Presidium. The Lithuanian Supreme Soviet declared independence on May 18, 1989, followed by Latvia's on July 28.

On August 23, 1989, perhaps the most amazing event in Baltic activism occurred: over two million people (40% of the Baltic population) participated in the "Via Baltica" demonstration, making a human chain connecting the Baltic capitals by joining hands. This was the anniversary of the secret Nazi-Soviet agreement of 1939 that provided for the annexation of the Balts into the Soviet Union. A stern warning from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in Moscow followed two days later, accusing the national fronts of taking advantage of democracy and glasnost to deceive the public and foster nationalist hysteria. It concluded that "the fate of the Baltic peoples was in danger...The consequences could be disastrous...if the nationalists manage to achieve their goals. The very viability of the Baltic nations could be called into question.' In other words; if you keep this up, you're going to be crushed."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Jack F. Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, (New York: Random House), 1995, p. 237.

The remainder of 1989 saw each republic quietly pursuing the goal of independence in its own way, with some response from Moscow. In Latvia, the Popular Front officially endorsed the goal of independence on October 8. On November 12, the Estonian Supreme Soviet annulled the act of the 1940 Estonian Parliament which requested incorporation into the USSR. The Lithuanian Communist Party withdrew from the CPSU on December 20; the attempt was rejected six days later by the CPSU Central Committee.

Two significant events occurred outside the Baltics during this time which affected their status. The first was the December 2-3 summit in Malta where Bush and Gorbachev discussed several issues, including the Baltics. They made an agreement in which Gorbachev pledged to avoid using violence in the region if at all possible, but could not allow unilateral secession. Bush promised that the U.S. would not act to exacerbate the situation there as long as no violence was used. If Moscow did violently repress the Balts however, further progress in U.S.-Soviet relations would be blocked.<sup>53</sup>

The second major event was on December 24, when the USSR Supreme Soviet declared the secret protocol in the Nazi-Soviet pact invalid. They did not however, rescind the annexation of the Baltic states or other territory that was attained as a result of that agreement.<sup>54</sup> Ironically, Gorbachev was to base his claim in the Baltics on an agreement his government had already deemed null and void.

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<sup>53</sup>Matlock, p. 273.

<sup>54</sup>Matlock, p. 753.

In the first half of 1990 Moscow and Vilnius experienced substantial discord over the independence issue. Gorbachev visited Lithuania in January in a failed effort to convince a majority of Lithuanian Communists to stay in the CPSU. Parliamentary elections in February and March gave *Sajudis*--backed candidates absolute control. Gorbachev's response included open threats of economic and territorial retaliation if they seceded, which the Lithuanians rejected. On March 11, the Lithuanian Supreme Council declared the Republic's independence and elected V. Landsbergis as chief of state. He sent a message to the Soviet leader the following day asking him to recognize Lithuanian independence.<sup>55</sup>

Moscow denounced the action and resolved that Lithuania would continue to be a part of the Soviet Union, saying the Soviet government had yet to determine "...the conditions and procedures for secession should a republic insist on trying to do so."<sup>56</sup> Moscow passed laws giving central authorities the power to intervene at will in cases of secession, to include establishing martial law. The Soviet military began seizing buildings in Vilnius, and surrounded the Parliament building on the night of March 23-24. They encouraged anti-government demonstrations and dropped leaflets encouraging Russian and Polish workers to strike. Foreign journalists were ordered to leave the country while Gorbachev continued to apply political pressure. Moscow resolutely insisted while these events were going on that it was not using force.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Alfred Erich Senn, *Gorbachev's Failure in Lithuania*, (New York: St. Martin's Press), 1995, p. 95.

<sup>56</sup> Senn, p. 96.

<sup>57</sup> Senn, p. 98.

Landsbergis and the Lithuanians peacefully withstood these efforts to repress their independence movement, to the point where Gorbachev decided to take greater steps. On April 13, he offered an ultimatum giving the Lithuanian government the option to revoke their declared independence or face a blockade. They refused and the embargo began on April 18. It included oil, natural gas, and a long list of items for which Moscow expected payment in hard currency. It lasted 75 days, ending on June 30 with a compromise suitable to both sides: the Lithuanian parliament voted to temporarily suspend the implementation of its independence declaration.

More unrest occurred the following January in both Vilnius and Riga on what were to be termed "Bloody Sundays." On January 7, 1991 Soviet paratroopers entered all three republics, "...allegedly to look for young men who had fled or were evading service in the Soviet army."<sup>58</sup> Political and military tension, as well as tension between Lithuanian and Russian workers, built up dramatically in Vilnius during the next several days. By Saturday, the city was under military blockade. Soviet action culminated in the early morning of the 13th with a siege of the city's television tower in which 13 Lithuanians were killed. On January 20 in Riga, fifty Soviet Black Beret troops invaded the Interior Ministry headquarters killing five people. Several of them also opened fire in the lobby of a hotel across the street. Gorbachev publicly denied personal responsibility for both

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<sup>58</sup>Senn, p. 127.

attacks, blaming the violence on the Balts themselves, in spite of their adherence to peaceful actions.<sup>59</sup>

In February and March, the three republics held referendums on independence resulting in overwhelming public support for the cause. Each capital reached a stalemate with Moscow over political and territorial issues. Not until the failed coup attempt staged in Moscow in August did events turn around for the Balts. In its aftermath, the three new governments could finally bask in the glow of international recognition. Iceland was the first to extend its recognition on August 22, while the U.S. did so on September 2. The historical injustice they endured for five decades came to an end at last on September 6, 1991 with formal recognition by the USSR State Council.

## **B. U.S. POLICY AND THE BALTICS**

The responses of the U.S. government throughout this period have received mixed reviews. Critics have suggested that President Bush's seemingly flimsy support toward the end of the Baltics' struggle for independence flew in the face of the more substantive tone American policy took early on. Others insist that he had an understanding of the different factors affecting the cause and acted in the most realistic way considering his priorities for protecting American interests. U.S. held to its policy of non recognition of the Baltic annexation as result of the Nazi-Soviet pact throughout.

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<sup>59</sup>Beschloss, p. 315.

The first open confrontation where the U.S. government took notice of events in the Baltics was February 16, 1988. A demonstration was scheduled to celebrate the 70th anniversary of Lithuanian independence, to which then-President Reagan had issued a statement of support. A large group of U.S. senators had also written a warning to Gorbachev against interference. A heavy Soviet military and police presence ended up keeping demonstrators off the streets of Vilnius, prompting special services with large turnouts in the churches instead.<sup>60</sup>

In July 1989, a Lithuanian delegation representing *Sajudis* called on Ambassador Matlock, the chief U.S. representative in Moscow. They informed him of their plan to achieve complete Lithuanian independence from Moscow by mid-1990. It consisted of stages to simultaneously address legal, economic, and political issues, beginning with an annulment of the 1940 Lithuanian Parliament's adherence to the terms of the Nazi-Soviet pact and subsequent annexation. When they asked what could be expected from the U.S. government when their goal was reached, the ambassador could not respond officially or even offer an abstract reply from Washington, stating that "[governments do not like hypothetical questions."<sup>61</sup> He did give them his personal assessment: Americans and their government would sympathize with them if they declared independence, but official recognition would have to be based on a judgment of whether or not the government

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<sup>60</sup>Kritsian Gerner and Stefan Hedlund, *The Baltic States and the End of the Soviet Empire*, (London: Routledge), 1993, p. 91.

<sup>61</sup>Matlock, p. 231.

actually controlled the territory it claimed. He was also concerned that hard-liners in Moscow might consider U.S. recognition a direct challenge. He could only offer strong, though nonviolent, support if the Soviets used force in the region.

Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze came to the U.S. in September. His first stop was in Washington where he met with the President and Secretary of State Baker. On the nationalities issue in the Soviet Union, he said that Moscow was "...fully aware of the extent to which improved relations between states depend on domestic stability."<sup>62</sup> In a review of the meeting with National Security Advisor Scowcroft afterward, Bush expressed a clear commitment to the maintenance of the status quo in the Soviet Union, saying that hastening the breakup. Scowcroft expressed concern that U.S. support of secessionist republics might provoke a Soviet crackdown or prompt a militaristic or authoritarian turn in the character of the central government.

The second part of the Foreign Minister's visit took place at Baker's ranch in Wyoming. When Baker asked about how Gorbachev planned to deal with the question of secessionism, his counterpart replied that it would be without force because otherwise would mean the end of *perestroika*. In addressing the Baltic case, he insisted that in none of them was there a majority that would sanction complete separation from Moscow. Baker suggested holding a referendum on secession if that were the case. Even if it

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<sup>62</sup>Beschloss, p. 109.

passed, they'd "...end up with a lot of Finlands around you. Cut the Baltics loose! You'd be better off with three little Finlands."<sup>63</sup>

A group of Estonians visited Matlock in October of the same year, expressing their determination to legally and nonviolently press for Estonian independence. They were specifically concerned that the U.S. might revoke its non recognition policy while they were progressing toward their goal. Matlock assured them that as long as they didn't vote in a legitimate election to be a part of the Soviet Union, U.S. policy would continue to not recognize their annexation.

At the December summit on Malta, Bush and Gorbachev reached understandings on several issues. The most significant was the removal of barriers to expanded U.S.-Soviet trade. Gorbachev assured Bush that he would not use violence in Eastern Europe, but did not make such a categorical pledge regarding the Baltics, as was discussed above.

The U.S. kept a close eye on the events in Lithuania in early 1990. When they started making a serious effort toward independence, U.S. policy would be forced to reconcile several conflicting issues. The long-standing U.S. policy of non recognition of the incorporation of the Baltics into the Soviet Union would logically directly support U.S. recognition of Baltic independence. Yet, Bush was set on backing Gorbachev and allowing sufficient time for *glasnost*' and *perestroika* to work, so immediate support of Baltic independence efforts was out of the question. Nonetheless, Bush was earnest in his insistence that no violent repression of the Baltic movements take place. A confusing set

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<sup>63</sup>Beschloss, p. 111.

of circumstances faced American policy makers. Their initial stance was cautious discouragement.

Following Lithuania's declaration of independence on March 10, 1990, the White House issued two statements. They reaffirmed "'the Baltic peoples' inalienable right to peaceful self-determination,' and urged the Soviet government to enter into 'immediate constructive negotiations with the government of Lithuania.'"<sup>64</sup> They fell short of recognition based on the standard of territorial control. Bush continued to balance his support for Gorbachev with warnings that the use of force would hinder Soviet-American relations.

American officials had not expected Gorbachev to act so strongly as to issue and ultimatum and threaten blockade as he did on April 10. Although U.S. policy makers made up a list of alternative economic sanctions to show Washington's disapproval, Bush in the end chose to do nothing. He was concerned that "...we not inadvertently do something that compels the Soviet Union to take action that would set back the whole cause of freedom around the world."<sup>65</sup>

The U.S. held to a similar reaction regarding the Bloody Sundays of the following January. Bush took Gorbachev at his word that he wasn't responsible for the order to use force. Bush condemned the violence in the Baltics, but didn't criticize Gorbachev

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<sup>64</sup>Senn, p. 94.

<sup>65</sup>Senn, p. 106.

personally. He explained "The principle that has guided us is simple: Our objective is to help the Baltic peoples achieve their aspirations, not to punish the Soviet Union."<sup>66</sup>

President Bush visited Moscow on July 30-31, where he showed determined support for the Soviet leader. He stopped in Kiev on August 1, and delivered the infamous "Chicken Kiev" speech, which was unfortunately misrepresented by the American press. The visit actually set several positive precedents. For the first time in centuries, the leader of a major power visited a Soviet republic, treated its leaders as sovereign, and dealt with them only in their own language. His main message was that the future was up to the republics to choose and stressed the power of democratic means. Tangible support for such action still hadn't been offered in the Baltics.

Throughout this period, the Baltic experts at the State Department urged the White House to put more weight on the independence issue in their policy. Understanding the importance of American principles like democracy and the inalienable right of all people to live in freedom (which Bush himself had referred to), they promoted an active role in standing up for these causes in the Baltic. Despite their advice, Bush chose to support Gorbachev at the expense of good relations with the Baltic governments.

In the aftermath of the August coup while Western governments granted the Baltics recognition, the U.S. waited almost two weeks. Even though they had never recognized the Baltics' annexation, Bush paradoxically declined to offer immediate acknowledgment of their freedom. The principle reason for this was to promote the safety

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<sup>66</sup>Senn, p. 141.

of Soviet nuclear weapons. Only after Moscow made clear that it was willing to accept Baltic independence and ensured the peaceful means for other republics to follow in establishing their independence did Bush extend his recognition. He insisted, "When history is written, nobody is going to remember that we took 48 hours more than Iceland, or whoever else it is."<sup>67</sup> In fact, the Balts haven't forgotten.

### C. THE NUCLEAR PRIORITY

President Bush's highest priority during the breakup of the Soviet Union was to do what he could to ensure the safety of Soviet nuclear weapons, both within the Russian Federated Republic and on the territory of the three applicable non-Russian republics (the Ukrainian, Byelorussian, and Kazakh SSRs).<sup>68</sup> When signs of independence movements first began to appear after Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost'* were implemented in 1988-9, the preferable scenario for American national interests from the highest levels of leadership was to maintain Soviet unity. U.S. leaders had been dealing with the same form of Soviet government for decades and had been successful at avoiding nuclear war, so the maintenance of the stability of this government was logically likely to continue with similar success. Any separatist movements by the republics would be considered a threat to the security of the weapons.

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<sup>67</sup>Senn, p. 153.

<sup>68</sup>Senn, p. 153.

This perspective was missed or not highly valued by several interested parties. The State Department, the Baltic diaspora in the U.S., Baltic leaders, and congressional lobby groups for the Baltic cause asked or encouraged Bush to take on a proactive role in the Baltic struggle for sovereignty. They credibly argued that America was by definition a champion of the spread of democracy and the Baltic case provided a perfect model for the peaceful establishment of American values. To not support it whole-heartedly would be tantamount to hypocrisy.

The weapons in question consisted of a total of 10,841 warheads. The majority of them (6,595) were in the form of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). The remaining warheads were divided as follows: 2,810 on submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), 610 on bombs and short-range missiles, 720 on air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs), and 100 on sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs).<sup>69</sup> Of these, 3,028 were outside Russian territory. Ukraine had 1,240 ICBM warheads and 667 dedicated to the 41 bombers there. 1,040 ICBM warheads were on Kazakh territory along with 40 bombers, but no additional warheads. There were 81 ICBM warheads in Belarus.<sup>70</sup>

With such force within their borders, leaders of the potential breakaway republics might have been tempted to retain possession of the weapons for any of several possible uses that might arise. No government except Russia, however, would have procedures

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<sup>69</sup>National Academy of Sciences, *The Future of the U.S.-Soviet Nuclear Relationship*, (Washington: National Academy Press), 1991, p. 53.

<sup>70</sup>Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, *Russia and the New States of Eurasia: The Politics of Upheaval*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1994, p. 261.

already established safeguarding the weapons against illegal transfer or firing. The ambiguity over proper control of the weapons in the case of secession by one of these republics was the threat Bush foresaw and sought to avoid. Although authorities in Minsk had agreed early on to allow Russia to reclaim the weapons on Belarussian soil, Ukraine and Kazakhstan were more reluctant.

All parties agreed that Ukraine and Kazakhstan did not own any of the nuclear weapons within their borders, that they were in fact owned by Russia, and were subject to removal to Russia for deployment or destruction by their rightful owner. Nonetheless, there was the possibility that a new Kazakh or Ukrainian leadership might try to claim ownership of them, despite their lack of technical expertise to control them. The requirement to give them back to Russia diametrically contradicted the common opinion in the fledgling republics that Russia was their number one threat. Keeping the weapons would provide a powerful means for security, especially since belonging to a Russian nuclear umbrella was an uncomfortable option. Returning the weapons also meant giving up a potent symbol of global standing and a significant deterrent against external threat other than from Russia.

The potential motivation for Ukrainian, Belarussian, and Kazakh leadership to attempt to gain control of the weapons was very credible. If the world had been faced with emergence of new nuclear powers, at least two alternatives could be offered. The international community could have "...accepted the fact of proliferation (and probably watched the entire nonproliferation regime unravel elsewhere in the world as a

consequence), or pursued...a dispossession strategy."<sup>71</sup> There was also the possibility that non governmental actors could get their hands on one or more of the weapons in the confusion of a messy secession. The preferable solution for Bush was to ensure from the earliest date possible that no such outcome would prevail by promoting the most stable and legal process possible for republics to secede.

Bush and his advisors were already conscious of the ugly possibilities when the Baltic states began making serious stirrings toward independence. As early as 1989, National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft had quietly put together a group to study the prospect of widespread discord erupting throughout the Soviet Union. Two more interagency groups were subsequently formed by Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates.<sup>72</sup> Although these groups found that unauthorized launch of Soviet strategic weapons was protected by a system of codes and identification devices, the likelihood for illegal use of tactical weapons was higher. These findings prompted Bush to restate his "...strong conviction that secessionism must not be allowed to 'get out of hand': it was essential that Gorbachev 'remain in overall charge of the situation over there.'"<sup>73</sup>

The U.S. maintained a consistent policy of support toward the Baltics for 48 years. It was an easy thing to do as long as the status quo prevailed. It reinforced U.S.

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<sup>71</sup>Dawisha., p. 259.

<sup>72</sup>Beschloss, p. 316.

<sup>73</sup>Beschloss, p. 316.

opposition to the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War, gave the Balts a special status in the world, and promoted the American values of democracy, freedom, and justice.

When the break up of the Soviet Union began to look like a very possible occurrence, other issues took priority. The U.S. government was as unprepared to deal with it as Gorbachev was. The White House chose to support Gorbachev to the end, even though it meant ignoring the development of the very principles on which the U.S. was founded as it was occurring in the Baltics.

Only the fear of nuclear instability was a realistic enough threat to justify Bush's policy. Although it was kept quiet in the media, this issue had the biggest claim on vital U.S. national interests, and was the only excusable reason for the U.S. not to get more involved in the Baltics. Publicly, Bush ended up looking like a hypocritical opponent to the values America takes for granted and should naturally support anywhere in the world. If however, the safety of nuclear weapons was truly his primary focus, then Bush's policy was the only realistic one to maintain.



## V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE U.S. POLICY BEYOND THE BALTICS

George F. Kennan recently wrote an article titled *On American Principles* in which he reminds us of the fundamental ideals on which this nation was founded. He defines a principle as "a rule of conduct...[barring special circumstances [to] be automatically applied" in devising policy.<sup>74</sup> He also points out that as principles can suggest positive action in policy, the actions can "...develop a momentum of their own in which the original considerations of principle either are forgotten or are compelled to yield to what appear necessities of the moment."<sup>75</sup> The Baltic case provides one example of this momentum in practice.

Wilson and Roosevelt both clearly and publicly stated the principles on which they intended to base American conduct in the World Wars. The U.S. policy during the Cold War of nonrecognition of the annexation of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union was a matter of principle, as well. Bush subscribed to and supported it in the beginning of his administration. All three presidents ended up abandoning these basics in the face of what appeared to be more immediate, higher priorities at the time. Only Bush was justified, as the safety of Soviet nuclear weapons was actually a legitimate threat to vital U.S. security interests.

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<sup>74</sup>George F. Kennan, "On American Principles," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1995, p. 119.

<sup>75</sup>Kennan, p. 120

Kennan uses a Fourth of July speech delivered by then-Secretary of State John Quincy Adams as a model for American principles and the application of them. At the time, the Spanish empire was breaking up and several South American countries were seeking independence. Memories of the struggle for independence that the U.S. had just endured were still fresh. "Adams realized that the U.S. historical experience left no choice but to welcome and give moral support" to the struggling peoples."<sup>76</sup> He also avoided being drawn too deeply into their efforts, as well as into similar conflicts elsewhere. There was an acceptable point of welcoming and respecting newly independent states as equals that did not involve going "...abroad in search of monsters to destroy."<sup>77</sup>

Communism and nuclear weapons were the monsters U.S. policy sought to destroy. As a result, the support due the Baltics in their process of establishing independence was sacrificed three times. Adams was able to appreciate the plight of struggling democracies and appropriately uphold America's principles because the U.S. had so recently persevered through the same ordeal. Wilson, Roosevelt, and Bush were less sympathetic to the importance of allowing new states to find their way into freedom because they had no memory of what it was like to be there, and no actual experience with the founding concepts of the nation they led.

The U.S. is likely to continue straying further from the course of effective, just foreign policy. In another recent article, Benjamin Schwarz convincingly argues that the

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<sup>76</sup>Kennan, p. 117

<sup>77</sup>Kennan, p. 118.

experts making foreign policy recommendations and decisions today have a distorted view of American history. The basis for this is the American tendency towards self-absorption. "We have made ourselves at home in the world, characteristically, by regarding it as America in the making."<sup>78</sup> He cites an inclination for Americans to draw parallels from our own history to issues abroad, rather than understanding them as individual conflicts within their own unique context. Such comparisons seldom match up and leave Americans, public and policy-making alike, with an inaccurate sense of global reality.

Another aspect of the problem is a failure to understand our own reality. While Americans would like to believe that their unity was founded on "the liberal notions of pluralism and tolerance,"<sup>79</sup> the truth is that the U.S. experienced bloodshed in revolution, civil war, and territorial battles to get where it is today. Instead of accepting the ugliness inherent in the process of achieving statehood, even as it was felt here at home, policy experts opt for the more palatable but less realistic priority of preventing the outbreak of civil war in developing and newly independent states.

Given their idealized view of American history, officials may counsel countries in turmoil to follow their interpretation of U.S. example under the often false assumption that the parties involved have a desire to compromise and reach agreement. They encourage the balancing of competing interests to "ameliorate ethnic, nationalist, and religious divisions...[agreeing] that those divisions will be less likely to erupt into violent

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<sup>78</sup> Benjamin Schwarz, "The Diversity Myth: America's Leading Export," *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1995, p. 57

<sup>79</sup>Schwarz, p. 58.

conflict if divided societies elevate tolerance and unity above ethnic, nationalist, or religious domination as their organizing principles."<sup>80</sup>

The officials miss the basic point of these organizing principles: those who hold them do so because they define a highly valued identity that could be compromised if tolerance and unity were to prevail. The divisions exist precisely because the principles outweigh the desire for unity. When compromise is not an acceptable option, the only means to a lasting solution may be violent defeat of the weaker side -- a reality American political executives find increasingly difficult to accept.

The decline of the hegemony of the American cultural hegemony is at the root of today's fragmenting and directionless American society. Since fragmentation is a threat to our own society, American logic naturally follows that it would be to others, as well. Policy makers thus take on the task of trying to save states they see as failing. To do so would help revalidate those American values of tolerance and pluralism as vital enough to provide the basis for nationhood, both here and overseas, and strengthen the hegemony once again.

One difference between the U.S. and countries American policy makers think they need to save is that those living here chose to come for the opportunities the American dream offered. If they didn't fully understand that their culture would be lost to some degree, they at least would have known that life would be different than in their homeland.

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<sup>80</sup>Schwarz, p. 59.

Now it's those homelands some Americans seek to fix in their own image, without appreciation for the value of the uniqueness intrinsic to the rest of the world.

Starting with the devastation of the natives on this continent, democratic America was built with the violent imperialism of a stronger U.S. defeating weaker nations for territory. Power sharing and the balancing of competing interests were not the chosen methods in establishing U.S. statehood, presumably because the objectives of those in power could not be reached through peaceful means. Having apparently forgotten their own history, American diplomats now expect nations in the early stages of creating statehood to do so with minimal struggle. While in some cases, such as in the Baltics, this has been possible, the events in several regions illustrate that conflict can often only be resolved with force.

Nonetheless, Americans have placed themselves in a category worthy of advising and helping others to keep peace, in spite of their memories of perhaps the ugliest episode of U.S. history, the Civil War. According to historian W.A. Williams, this war "'undercuts the popular mythology that America is unique...Only a nation that avoided such a conflict could make a serious claim to being fundamentally different.'"<sup>81</sup> How U.S. leaders could insist that other nations skip this part of development when their own predecessors found it unavoidable seems contradictory and even hypocritical.

Distasteful though it may seem, the benign solutions sought by policy makers today may be ineffective, while forcible actions like ethnic cleansing and partition have

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<sup>81</sup>Schwarz, p. 64.

proven to work. Cases like the Czech Republic and Poland deporting their trouble making German minorities after World War II, and the stabilizing partition of Cyprus by the Turkish army in 1974 are good examples. While it would be nice to think that all conflict could be solved by diplomatic or democratic means, history has proven such hopes to be unrealistic.

Schwarz offers only two practical alternatives for U.S. policy in the future: to remain passive when violence breaks out in a failing state, then take on a purely peacekeeping role only after the war has ended; or by choosing a side in the conflict and offering aid in imposing its will successfully. The qualification for such intervention would be the direct threat to specific, vital U.S. interests, which does not exist in most ENS conflicts. "Because 'humane' solutions are ineffective, and because effective solutions are too inhumane for the United States to consider in any but the most threatening situations, America is largely impotent in the face of ENS wars."<sup>82</sup> The case of Bosnia is likely to develop into the most timely support for this argument.

Schwarz aptly brings home the concept that America places so much attention on fixing conflict abroad because it is afraid to confront its own internal problems. It prioritizes reinforcing the illusion of a stable external environment over creating a stronger, less vulnerable stability from within. Only by recognizing and addressing the chaos brewing within its own borders can the U.S. free itself of its dependence on the conflict in other nations to justify its values.

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<sup>82</sup>Schwarz, p. 67.

The U.S. missions in the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia aptly fit this mold. Of the four, only the Persian Gulf could be justified on the basis of national interest. The rest were, or may well prove to be, ill-conceived attempts at avoiding focus on problems the U.S. acts internally.

U.S. policy in the last 75 years has taken a steady turn toward losing touch with both global reality and its own reality. The Baltic case, followed by several involvements since then, illustrate that American leaders will ever more easily leave principle behind when they see a more immediate fire threatening relations with another country, their chance of reelection, vital national security (whether real or not), or their approval ratings.



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